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Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Painted in 1857, French artist Jean Francois Millet's gentle work, 'The Gleaners,' now hangs in the Louvre, in Paris.

California Grey Bears pick their way on the heels of commercial harvests

By RICHARD EMANUEL
Sentinel staff writer

BENEATH AN overcast sky, a chocolate-colored bus jolts to a halt beside a Watsonville lettuce field. A work crew piles out, men and women in their late 50s, 60s and 70s.

Picking up baskets, they grip

large knives and plunge into the furrowed field. Baskets full of lettuce are soon being muscled onto a flatbed truck, hefted above wooden bins and tipped. Green heads of lettuce roll out and tumble into the bins.

The pickers are California Grey Bears, volunteers age 55 and over, gleaning lettuce from a field that

was picked by a commercial grower a week earlier. The produce will wind up in lunches and free bags of groceries for the needy, from Santa Cruz County to Oakland and perhaps beyond.

But right now, an hour or two in the cool fields is mostly an outing, a way to enjoy some fresh air, exercise and fellowship.

Ed Barrows, 57, of Aptos, coordinates "gleaning" for the Santa Cruz County Grey Bears. He has been on the job for four months.

"I've sure got a lot to learn," he says. "When I started, I didn't even know when the growing seasons were. I'd call the growers and they'd say, 'Yeah, you can pick that

The Gleaners





Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Dina Babbitt once worked in fields at 'model Jewish ghetto.'

For one worker, gleaning has roots in Nazi Europe

THE GREEN FIELDS of Watsonville are a long way from the gardens and orchards of Theresienstadt, the "model Jewish ghetto" the Nazis set up during World War II.

But Dina Babbitt was mindful of the contrast as she picked lettuce last week for the California Grey Bears' free food programs.

"The first place I picked food was in Theresienstadt," she said. "You know about that?"

Theresienstadt camp was built in the 18th century fortress of a town in Babbitt's native Czechoslovakia. It was intended in part as a holding place for prominent Jews whose disappearance the world would notice.

It was the only camp the Nazis ever allowed outsiders to visit, and boasted an inmate orchestra and other arts groups. A council of Jewish elders ostensibly governed the camp. But the real power was in Nazi hands.

"I volunteered for agricultural work because that was the only place you got enough to eat," said Babbitt.

Thirty-two thousand died in Theresienstadt of disease and starvation. Thousands more died through on their way to camps in Auschwitz, Poland elsewhere.

used to put cucumbers in clothes and smuggle them

past the guards," Babbitt recalled, smiling. "When we were up on ladders, picking fruit where they couldn't watch us, the guards would tell us to whistle so we couldn't eat anything. But we didn't listen.

"There were just a few of us in the agricultural department, you really had to have connections to get in. My boyfriend had connections. He rescued me."

Babbitt is an artist, and before she picked food, she painted postcard-size reproductions of artworks at Theresienstadt. After three-and-a-half years there, she was sent on to Auschwitz.

"It was an absolute fluke, but my painting saved me," she said. She was assigned to decorate a children's day-care barracks. "The kids wanted me to paint Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs."

Nazi officials discovered her talent and kept her around to paint portraits and other things.

After the war, Babbitt did animation work in Southern California ("We did Captain Crunch.") She moved to Bonny Doon nine years ago with her friend, the late artist Les Goldman.

Babbitt now lives in Felton. She gleanes produce for Grey Bears two or three times a week.

—Richard Emanuel

— but it won't be ready until August." He laughs.

Today's gleaning is from a field owned by Sakata Ranches. After the first harvest, the company "watered it back," according to Sakata's John Gospodnetich. "We'll probably go in there again ourselves in about a week. Sometimes we even give (the Grey Bears) first picking. They've been pretty decent people."

BESIDES LETTUCE, Barrow's crews pick apples, beets, pears, persimmons, carrots, cauliflower, broccoli, peas and other crops.

Except for a 10-week period during winter, Grey Bears glean two or three times a week. They range as far afield as Salinas and Soledad and into the Santa Cruz Mountains for fruit orchards.

"Some of this lettuce will go into the salads we'll make at lunch today," he says, referring to the Grey Bears' lunch program for members. "Some will go into our grocery bags."

Grey Bears distribute 3,000 free bags of groceries to members each week. Seven hundred of the bags are delivered to shut-ins. Besides produce, the bags contain bread and muffins, canned goods and other donated items. Barrows trades some of the gleaned produce to other food banks around Northern California.

"I like trading," he says. "I like the wheeling and dealing and trying to stretch what you have to get as much variety as you can into the bags."

"We gleaned two tons of pears yesterday and I've already traded off some of those for two pallets of melons from a food bank in Oakland. We might get some red tomatoes, too."

CAESAR RUCKER, 72, of Live Oak, joined Grey Bears five years ago and has been gleaning for about three years.

"This is some of the nicest lettuce I've seen," he comments. He bends over, whacks off a head and places it in the basket next to him.

"Lettuce is so nice to harvest, it doesn't take long to fill up our bins," he says. "Ever try to fill up a bin with carrots?"



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

'Comin' at ya,' shouts Rich Fickes, 67, as he and other Grey Bears conduct a post-harvest harvest.

Rich Fickes, 67, of Paradise Park, stands on the back of a flatbed truck that has been backed into the field. He is emptying baskets full of lettuce into the eight wooden bins on the back of the truck. The bins are cubes, 4 feet on a side.

Fickes dumps a basketful of lettuce into a bin and tosses the basket down near Ken Rhea (pronounced Ray).

"Comin' at ya, Rhea!" he shouts. Rhea, 69, also of Paradise Park, is a regular gleaner.

"It's good exercise," he says. "Just getting out, being with other people beats sitting home watching television. My wife also delivers (grocery bags) to shut-ins."

Dina Babbitt, of Felton, is another regular. She first picked crops as a young girl in Theresienstadt, a Jewish concentration camp in her native Czechoslovakia, she says. She survived three-and-a-half years there, plus a year-and-a-half in Auschwitz, the Nazi death camp in Poland.

Babbitt enjoys getting out now to pick crops under more pleasant circumstances. She likes to pick fruit crops best.

"You get lots of stretching exercise," she says. "But everything is fun to pick. The people are interesting. Everybody has a past and you find out about it in the bus."

GLEANING reminds Dorothy Locke, 72, of Rio Del Mar, of Please see **GLEANERS** — E2

Gleaners/ Seniors who care

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growing up during the Depression.

"We had five girls and no money," she says. "My mother would take us out to the apricot and walnut orchards in the San

Fernando Valley, and we would glean."

She works as she talks, decapitating heads of lettuce with practiced ease and dropping them into a basket.

"My husband died two years ago,

so I need to get out of the house," she continues. "It's nice outdoor work. And I enjoy the rides, too, the different scenery and the fellowship. There's lots of joking and sometimes we sing in the bus all the way home. One man plays the harmonica — oldies!"

Just over an hour has passed since the gleaners took up their knives and entered the field. The bins are full of leafy, green lettuce. The gleaners grab plastic bags from inside the bus and harvest a few heads for themselves.

A container of water for washing and a folding table are produced from the back of the bus. Potato chips, sandwiches, coffee and doughnuts are laid out on the table and the work crew gathers around.

"Help yourself! Coffee? Have a sandwich!" Everyone in turn presses food on the visiting reporter. They exchange good-natured jibes. It's been a good morning and the work has gone quickly.

"People say old folks can't do anything," someone observes over a cup of steaming coffee. "We're feeding 3,000 people."



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Working the fields has been an education for Ed Barrows.